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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly reviews the evidence on the use of the reflective journal as a learning and professional development tool for teachers and school administrators. It argues that a new trend tends to permeate the teaching profession: reflecting on what teaching really means. It also contends that a reflective educator is aware that taking time and energy to reflect on and improve one's work is absolutely essential to the comprehension of the process of teaching itself. Subjects of this study were 35 graduate students in clinical internship courses. The reflective journal, the assessment and data collection tool, displayed the raw knowledge, the write-ups, that later were transformed into case studies for classroom analysis. From that point, and after recycling the data, cases were constructed, and the subjects were exposed to real situations. Findings confirm the existence of similar patterns or concerns, strengths, and deficiencies when teachers and administrators reflect on their own day-to-day practices. (Contains 1 figure and 13 references.) (Author/SLD)

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The Reflective Journal as a Learning and Professional Development Tool for Teachers and Administrators

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THE REFLECTIVE JOURNAL AS A LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOOL FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Abstract

This paper briefly reviews evidence on the utilization of the reflective journal as a learning and professional development tool for teachers and school administrators. It argues that a new trend tends to permeate the teaching profession: reflecting on what teaching really means. It also contends that a reflective educator is aware that taking time and energy to reflect on and improve one's work are absolutely essential to the comprehension of the process of teaching itself. The reflective journal, the assessment and data collection tool, displayed the raw knowledge, the write-ups, that later were transformed into case studies for classroom analysis. From here, and after recycling the data, cases were constructed and the subjects were exposed to real situations. The findings confirmed the existence of similar patterns of concerns, strengths, and deficiencies when teachers and administrators reflect upon their own day to day practices.

Keywords: Reflective Journal, Reflective Educator, Assessment Tool, Professional Development

Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to:

- provide evidence on the effectiveness of using Reflective Journals as assessment tools for teachers and administrators,
- show how graduate students are involved intimately in self-assessment, collaborative critique, self-reflection, and goal setting, and
- discuss the nature of reflective practice and its importance in teachers and school administrator' preparation and professional development.

Theoretical Framework

In these last few years of the twenty-one century , a significant shifts in the teaching profession is emerging. In fact, the general public have also switched their constantly critique to teachers to a more articulated and considerate discourse due to the evidence they have shown of becoming more reflective, analytical, and more sensitive to make the necessary changes conducive to higher student academic achievement. In other words, parents and communities are

applauding the educational reforms and initiatives that include staff developments that invite a teacher to want to improve his/her professional pedagogical practices, and carefully examine the situation that is taking place in a given time, precisely study the options available analytically, and make conscious choices on how to act. This process is what is known as a reflective one.

Embracing the idea of the "reflective teacher" seems to be the new trend in education, particularly at primary and secondary levels. When a teacher and an administrators reflect on what they do, know, and control, they have developed metacognitive skills. In other words, metacognition is having control over your own thinking process, knowing when, how, and why to use the skills and knowledge that one's possesses [Flavell, 1979].

Teachers and administrators have realized the critical aspect of their own reflections. They may find that the reflection time is productive, if they take time to properly reflect. Traditionally, they were more reactive than proactive and more reactive that reflective. Particular attention deserves the school administrators who seem to be trapped in a reactive cycle of "putting out fires" making them less reflective.

Time has always been an issue and a concern for teachers and administrators when they need to engage in reflection [Killion & Todnen, 1991]. This factor seems to represent an obstacle. Teachers and administrators see themselves as a very busy group of individuals. They both depend on policies, rules, and regulations that might impede time for reflection. It is then believed that it is in the hands of the school administrators to solve this dilemma of time. There is no doubt that administrative support is a key element to encourage teachers to trust, to be intellectually inquisitive, to share, to raise questions, to debate, to challenge, to provide mutual support, and to express doubts. If we admit that the time factor would be facilitated and solved by administrators' ability and awareness, then they should also facilitate their own time for reflection in order to search and try new actions based on these efforts.

Reflection is an individual process, too. It is up to the individual to want to become reflective. It depends on individual needs for becoming more reflective, more objective, more proficient in what he/she does, and ultimately to be more metacognitive of the actions taken. In fact, after examining and analyzing several research studies, Brubacher, Case, and Reagan [1994] found that teachers are the least reflective group of individuals. For these reasons, this study attempts to look extensively and carefully teachers and administrators' reflections through a systematic journal writing process, an assessment tool, called Reflective Journal.

Reflective Journal: What is it?

Journals have a long history as a means of self-expression and reflection, and they can be used as assessment and learning tools. A reflective journal involves students intimately in self-assessment, collaborative critique, self-reflection, and goal-setting. As an assessment tool, it provides pre-service, practitioners and school administrators with the means for transforming their educational experiences into "best practices."

...One of the hardest things for me to do was to acknowledge that my former perceptions of some colleagues were very flawed. I found part of my picture of the relationships that I had previously established was so inaccurate, in light of my new role: Assistant Principal...I experienced verbal hostility, questioning of my professional credentials, and unwillingness to accept my directives...[R. M., School Leadership, 2001]

According to Kerka [1996], there are different types of journals that include the reader response journal, the learning log, the reflective journal, and the electronic journal. For the purpose of this paper, the reflective journal is selected. A reflective journal is a private artifact that stimulates individual reflection. It facilitates the process of reflection of teachers and administrators on teaching and learning, administrative decisions, educational goals, cultural background and differences, repertoire of teaching strategies, individualized attention, differentiated classroom, active learning, and world learning activities among others. By systematically writing in the reflective journal, practitioners acquire a better understanding of his/her students, their likes and dislikes, their ethnic and cultural background, their personalities, and respect and validate their languages and cultures. Expressing in print that knowledge and analyzing the ideas versed, teachers and administrators could make changes, modify or preserve their teaching and administrative practices.

...As I reflect upon my internship, I feel I have developed my own professionalism even more than I had imagined. I have had the opportunity to meet new people and expand my horizons...[J. S., School Leadership, 2001]

As an assessment tool, the reflective journal is directly linked to a teacher's instruction, instructional goals, and assessment question if it is to be helpful. If assessment is understood as "the process of carefully collecting or recording and analyzing students' products and processes in order to inform instruction," [Rhodes, 2001, p.vii], then the reflective journal is the proper artifact which would allow to inform teachers and administrators on how their pedagogical and instructional experiences are being carried out.

Methodological Bases

The reflective journal is the assessment artifact utilized in this study with the purpose of compiling information leading toward the construction of a body of pedagogical and administrative practices. A selected number of 35 reflective journals from practitioners provided the data needed for building the knowledge base. The data was gathered over two years (2000-2001) from students' reflective journals and multiple observations and interviews. The journal writing was the primary assessment strategy integrated into graduate-level internships and practicum courses.

...This is my big dilemma. I expect people to work the way I work and I expect people to act the way I would act. I am still waiting. I am realizing that there are different work styles, good and bad, different personalities, good and bad, and different solutions to sometimes the same situation for different people...[A. V., School Leadership, 2000]

The School Administrators

The subjects of this study were graduate students enrolled in two clinical internship courses. The Instructional Leadership Practicum, a 400-level course, is offered to graduate students pursuing a career in the school administration and leadership fields. The course objective is to provide the student with a supervised experience in the functions and duties associated with instructional leadership and school management. Each student participates in administrative duties related to instructional leadership for two terms and school management another term. Examples of tasks include staff and curriculum development, pupil personnel experiences, establishing and maintaining effective learning environments, implementation of policy, business and facilities' management, and community relations.

The Teachers

The subjects-practitioners-were enrolled in two sections of the Methods and Materials for Teaching English as a Second Language course. The objective of the course is to provide exposure to different methods and approaches used for teaching ESL and giving the students the opportunity to use and adapt different class materials. An integral part of the course is the practical application of the theories in the students own classroom. Examples of the tasks required in the class include constructing learning experiences that display an integration of skills across disciplines; analyzing data collected in the field experience to be used to inform instructional planning an d applying a variety of developmentally appropriate experiences that demonstrate varied approaches to knowledge construction and second language development.

Procedures

For four regular semester graduate students engaged in interactive reflective journal writing. Teachers were asked to reflect on decisions that influence their teaching practice and school administrators on the decisions that affect their day to day administrative processes. Analysis and evaluation of their observed behaviors helped these professionals to assess their performance, set professional goals, critique and modify their practice. They developed an Activity Log and a daily Reflective Journal. They were trained to identify and keep track on relevant actions, activities, or situations which deserved careful and full attention. Using the reflective journal, each teacher wrote about what the situation was, how it was handled, how the situation impacted him/her teaching or administrative future, and what changes the reflective educator would have made in order to optimize effective results.

...My principal and site supervisor was very uncooperative. Being a new principal herself, she was trying to gather her bearings, which semi left me out in the cold. She had hard time delegating her authority, which left her with task after task to complete on her own. [M. M., School Leadership, 2001]

The Nature of Reflective Journals

The analysis of the reflective journals revealed that most teachers and school administrators when they reflect involve concrete experiences, elicit critical application of

knowledge to organizational events, encourage commitment to action, and foster reflective thinking as an important facet of growth in teaching abilities.

...In reflecting back on my practicum experience, I would like to state that the experience was overwhelming. I seize each day as a learning experience. I was able to witness what actually goes on behind close doors and throughout the day...I now have a better understanding to the amount of work that is involved in administration...deadlines to meet, parents to see, staff and students problems to be solved...[D. T., School Leadership, 2000]

Four factors affecting the willingness and ability to reflect emerged: individual developmental level, clarity and nature of the expectations of the journal, quantity and quality of the reflections, and perception on the work environment.

...The acceptance of one's critique or a suggestion is a motivation for me in the sense that it pushes me forward. I can look at myself and honestly say when things should have gone differently or when an approach was not pertinent to a lesson. [H.H., Methods & Materials for Teaching ESL, 2001]

The predominant topics of reflective journaling involve analysis of the actions, introspection of the process followed by the educator and a willingness toward adaptations, changes and modifications of the perceived product.

...I did notice however, that I had asked them to choose too many animals to write about in their stories...Another change that I am going to make in this lesson is that instead of writing a group story, each student will have to write his/her own story but with collaboration from the group...[D.G., Methods & Materials for Teaching ESL, 2001]

Another constant topic is the awareness of the benefits of keeping a reflective journal. Students manifest a commitment to keeping a reflective journal as a professional development tool, because the process has convinced them of its value.

...Upon reviewing the lesson I could appreciate what worked, and I could identify areas where I could use improvement. I will continue to keep a journal where I can review my classroom activities and my students reactions because that helps me keep in touch with what I am doing and keep an eye on improving my teaching...[N.D., Methods & Materials for Teaching ESL, 2001]

Learning and Professional Development (LPD): A Systematic Model

The Learning and Professional Development Model (LPDM) is an ongoing, integrated design and development strategy that is inclusive, proactive, strategic, and systemic. It examines the rationale, implications, and utility of assumptions, beliefs, and guiding principles about teaching, administration, students, the community, and schooling. It explores how the reflective educator can be organized to meet his/her basic needs, develops essential competencies, and builds support systems.

The LPD model focuses on designing and planning around the six reflective strategic

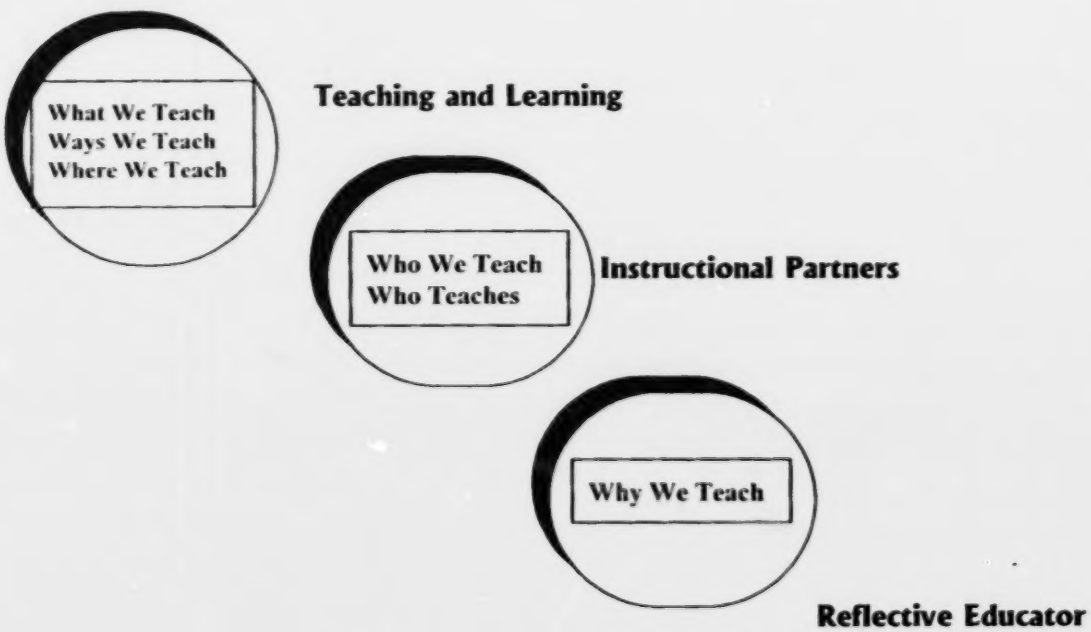
priorities: *Why we teach, Who we teach, What we teach, Ways we teach, Who teaches, and Where we teach.* The reflective model focuses on reflective teaching. It also focuses on leadership, not simply management.

In examining the efficacy and effectiveness of the six reflective questions, the model aspires to connect:

- shared vision and leadership,
- contexts/constraints for teaching, learning, administration, and development,
- professional development and collaboration,
- instructional efficacy and expertise,
- policy,
- assessment, evaluation and accountability.

The Learning and Professional Development Model invites the reflective educator to improve diagnosis and assessment of academic and social strengths and skills. It focuses on strategic teaching and learning (beyond basic skills and information). It serves to the whole spectrum of "learning" that occurs in schools (intellectual, affective, conative, social, etc.). The model facilitates the coordination of instructional planning and scheduling. In other words, the LPD model attends to the quality of the "internal learning" transforming the reflective educator.

The LPD model is organized in three phases:



The **Teaching and Learning** phase promotes dialogue about the goals of instruction; attends to the "best practices" in teaching; facilitates teaching and learning that is active, strategic, meaningful, and connected to the world beyond classrooms and schools (beyond "basic skills" and information); redefines curricular goals and organization and strategies for assessing student progress; and restructures the organizational contexts and culture of schooling.

The **Instructional Partnership** phase examines the composition, competence, and utilization of those who teach in and out of schools; understands the schools' new clients; and provides prompt and meaningful useful feedback.

The **Reflective Educator** phase communicates in word and deed high expectations and standards; addresses issues that affect students' lives as an integral part of the school programs and priorities; redefines his/her own academic role and administrative responsibilities; initiates a process of internal dialog about the how's and why's of teaching and learning; respects diverse talents and ways of learning; attends to the qualitative characteristics of the "learning environment" in the school and classroom; and rethinks concepts, purposes, and strategies for enhancing self-academic and administrative strengths, skills, and prior knowledge.

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